

DISCUSSION OF SIGNIFICANT NATURAL AREAS

An exemplary natural area contains a good example of one or more community types with good integrity, with or without the presence of rare species. Exemplary natural areas should be considered targets for conservation. They are generally referred to in this report as "sites". The sites in this report fall into three categories recognized by the NC NHP: standard site, macrosite, and megasite. **Standard sites** are those containing from one to thousands of acres, with reasonably good integrity throughout. In certain cases, standard sites fall into distinct groups with strong geographical connections and ecological relationships. Such clusters of standard sites are arranged within **macrosites**. Undeveloped lands between standard sites in a macrosite are typically of lower quality, but contain ecologically important buffers, wildlife corridors, or landscape connections. The even larger **megasite** is delineated where a macrosite lies within a larger region that is within a distinct geographical unit. For example, the Foothills Megasite contains the large South Mountains Macrosite (with its constituent standard sites) as well as a larger, distinct region of relatively undeveloped natural lands in which four other standard sites are located. The significant sites of Burke County, arranged in geographic and ecological categories, are listed in Table 4. In the table, the sites are arranged within the following categories: Central and Eastern Burke County Sites, Blue Ridge Sites, and Foothills Sites. Standard sites are indented in the table where they occur within a macrosite or megasite. A detailed description of each of the significant sites shown in Table 4 is contained in the Site Descriptions section of this report. A map of the county showing locations of the significant sites is provided at the beginning of the Site Descriptions section.

Significant sites in Burke County are strongly clustered in the Blue Ridge region and the region of the South Mountains and associated foothills. In contrast, sites identified in central and eastern Burke County are smaller and widely scattered, from differences in land use due to closer proximity to developed areas and gentler topography.

Although areas in the Blue Ridge received relatively little survey, several new significant sites were located. This part of the county contains the only known sites for the rare Southern Appalachian Bog community type, with several rare plant species that are restricted to bog habitats. Four standard sites in this part of the county form a cluster and are contained within the Linville Gorge Macrosite. Linville Gorge and Linville Falls contain extensive, exemplary and rare natural community types, including old-growth forests, as well as a large number of rare plant and animal species. The gorge also contains the best examples of the rare High Elevation Rocky Summit communities in the county, as well as most of the global population of mountain golden-heather (*Hudsonia montana*), a very rare endemic species known from only one other site in the world. The highly significant Linville River Aquatic Habitat benefits from location within the protected gorge area. The Blue Ridge area has good potential for additional significant sites, especially those with old-growth forests, and it merits additional study.

The largest cluster of sites occurs in the South Mountains and the associated foothills to the northeast. The fifteen standard sites distributed through this region exhibit close proximity or a high degree of landscape connection, which greatly enhances their ecological viability. The site